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ABSTRACT

The concept of organizational culture is defined, and its relevance to higher education is explored, along with possible approaches for uncovering organizational culture on a college campus. The literature on higher education includes examples that apply the concept of organizational culture, or the implicit values, beliefs, and ideologies of organizational members. In higher education, culture affects student life, administration, and curriculum. Indicators of organizational culture that clarify both past and present cultural influences include sagas, heroes, symbols, and rituals. A saga usually describes a unique accomplishment of the organization, while heroes play a central role in an institution's saga because heroes are those who made crucial decisions or who exemplify the proper way to act. A symbol can make tangible an implicit value or belief and it can be recognized by the public as well. Finally, rituals translate culture into action (e.g., an outstanding teaching award ceremony). Three useful techniques to learn about the organizational culture are interview, observation, and document analysis. Studying organizational culture clarifies campus managerial styles and decision processes, which affect members of the organization. (SW)

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ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE IN THE STUDY OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Several authors have recently popularized organizational culture — the values, beliefs, and ideologies of an organization. While perhaps difficult to define and measure, organizational culture is useful in the study of higher education. This paper defines the concept, explores why it is relevant to higher education, and then describes possible approaches and techniques for uncovering organizational culture on a college or university campus. Examples of organizational culture at work demonstrate its value. The paper encourages other researchers to apply the concepts of organizational culture to their study of higher education.

The pervasive influence of organizational culture has recently captured the attention of those who study organizations. Ouchi's Theory Z, Pascale and Athos' The Art of Japanese Management, and Deal and Kennedy's Corporate Cultures all describe how organizational culture profoundly influences managerial behavior. This paper first defines organizational culture and briefly examines how the concept has been applied to colleges and universities. It then describes possible approaches and techniques for uncovering the influence of organizational culture. Finally, the paper explores why the study of organizational culture is relevant to researchers and practitioners. Thus the paper defines and illustrates the application of a useful perspective on higher education.

The literature has previously recognized that there is more to organizations than formal structure. The classic elements of organizational design such as hierarchical structure, formalization, rationality, and specialization are important (Tosi, 1975), but they do not fully explain organizational behavior. Leadership, for example, can transform an organization with a formal structure of rules and objectives into an institution that is a "responsive, adaptive organism" (Selznick, 1957, p. 5).

Pettigrew expands upon Selznick's study of organizations. Pettigrew views leadership and values as one part of a concept he calls organizational culture. He defines organizational culture as "the amalgam of beliefs, ideology, language, ritual, and myth" (1979, p.572). Pettigrew argues that an organization is a continuing social system and the elements of culture exert a powerful control over the behavior of those within it. Organizational culture induces purpose,

commitment, and order; it provides meaning and social cohesion; and clarifies and explains behavioral expectations. Culture influences an organization through the people that it comprises.

The recent popular literature on Japanese management techniques highlights the influence of organizational culture. Pascale and Athos (1981) describe organizational culture as the glue that holds an organization together. It is a "bass clef" that conveys at a deep level what management really cares about. Theory Z (Ouchi, 1981) is a specific set of cultural beliefs and values. Ouchi asserts that this particular combination of cultural elements is largely responsible for the success of Japanese businesses. In contrast to Ouchi, Deal and Kennedy (1982) propose that a variety of corporate cultures can increase organizational effectiveness. A strongly articulated culture tells employees what is expected of them and how to behave under a given set of circumstances. The coherence of thought and action a strong culture produces thus enhances organizational success. Because corporations with weak cultures do not have the sense of purpose and direction that is found in those with strong cultures, they often are less successful.

It is somewhat ironic that widespread interest in the interaction of culture and management grew out of studies of Japanese firms. As Chait (1982) and Dill (1982) both note, traditional administrative practices common in American colleges and universities are similar to Japanese management styles. Shared governance and collegiality are participatory management. Academic departments, in discussions of future direction, quality control, and problem resolution, function like quality circles. Tenure traditionally provides the economic and psychological benefits of lifetime employment. Although colleges and

universities have long benefitted from these managerial practices, they have not been identified as "organizational culture."

The concept of organizational culture is not new to higher education, however. Clark (1980) notes that the lofty doctrines associated with colleges and universities elicit almost religious emotions. He defines four cultural spheres that affect academic life in this way. They are (1) the cultures of specific academic disciplines, (2) the culture of the academic profession, (3) institutional cultures, and (4) the cultures of national systems of higher education. These four elements reflect academic structures. This paper focuses on the third category, the cultures of specific institutions.

The strength of institutional culture depends on several factors (Clark, 1980). Primary among them is the scale of the organization. Small organizations tend to have stronger cultures than do large organizations. Second is the tightness of the organization. Colleges with highly interdependent parts have stronger cultures than those with autonomous parts. Third is the age of the organization. As discussed below, culture develops over time and an institution with a long history simply has a larger base upon which to build its culture. Finally, the institution's founding influences the strength of its culture. A traumatic birth or transformation, like a long history, provides a stronger base upon which to build culture values and beliefs.

Clark's description of organizational saga is a classic embodiment of academic culture. Saga is a "collective understanding of unique accomplishment in a formally established group" (Clark, 1972, p. 179). It is a set of beliefs and values tied together in a story about the

institution's past. A saga strengthens the bond between the organization and students, alumni, faculty, and staff. A saga shapes social reality on the campus and thus controls behavior. According to Clark saga intensifies organizational commitment and feelings of membership in a special community. The trust and loyalty a saga produces are valuable resources in preserving organizational strength.

At the institutional level culture affects many aspects of campus life. There is a long history of interest in student culture and its effects (see for example Feldman and Newcomb, 1973 or Becker and Geer, 1958). Similar to the study of student culture is research on organizational climate — the atmosphere or style of life on a campus (Pace, 1968). A wide variety of instruments measure climate, but they classify institutions by standard typologies and are heavily influenced by psychological constructs. Organizational culture, on the other hand, focuses on the ideosyncratic values, beliefs, and ideologies of a campus. Measures of climate do not illuminate culture.

Organizational culture also affects curriculum and administration. Masland (1982), for example, demonstrates that organizational culture influences how academic computing fits into an institution's curriculum. As might be expected, a college that values a traditional liberal arts education is less apt to introduce a technical computing major. On the other hand, a college that primarily teaches business and management will want to introduce its students to the practical applications of computing that support business decisions. Along somewhat similar lines, an organization's culture affects the management of computer resources. A belief that students should have free access to computer resources in the same way that they have unlimited library resources is

part of some campus cultures, and it leads to several basic problems. Allocating scarce computer resources among competing users under a system of free access is a difficult task. This problem would not arise if institutional values did not stress unlimited access to educational resources.

Thus the literature on higher education includes examples that apply the concept of organizational culture. Culture comprises the implicit values, beliefs, and ideologies of those within the organization. In the business world it is reflected in managerial style and the behavior of employees. In higher education culture affects student life, administration, and curriculum.

While organizational culture is becoming more widely used and accepted, it is still difficult to find clear and succinct methods of uncovering an institution's culture. Typical of the means given for discovering organizational culture is this description.

> All one has to do to get a feel for how the different cultures of competing businesses manifest themselves is to spend a day visiting each . . . . There are characteristic ways of making decisions, relating to bosses, and choosing people to fill key jobs (Schwartz and Davis, 1981, p. 30).

Although it may be true, simply being told that if you go into an organization you will see its culture is not a tremendous help. This problem arises because of culture's implicit nature. It is further complicated because we are all embedded in our own cultures. In order to observe culture it must be visible; it must be explicit (Schein, 1981).

Windows on Organizational Culture

Luckily there are methods available to uncover organizational culture. Each involves looking for a specific influence of culture at work and from that evidence deducing something about the culture itself. For example, organizational culture develops over time through the actions and words of organizational leaders. Thus examination of organizational history often illuminates culture and its influences. Culture can also be seen in current actions. The methods used to make decisions, agendas of meetings, and personnel policy are common arenas for cultural influences. To understand an organization's culture one must pay close attention to the details of daily life. There are a number of windows on organizational culture that make it easier to see both past and present cultural influences. This article focuses on four in particular: saga, heroes, symbols, and rituals. While there are a variety of ways to "see" culture, these four are particularly helpful. They are easy to understand and apply. Becuse they are closely related, they may seem to overlap or be redundant at times. Yet there are subtle differences among them so each is described separately.

Saga. Saga (Clark, 1972) is the first window on organizational culture in higher education. A saga usually has its roots in an organization's history, and it describes a unique accomplishment of the organization. An institution's saga codifies what sets the school apart from others. Key faculty members, students, and alumni usually support an institution's saga. Unique academic program elements and images about the school also strengthen it. Clark uses Antioch, Swarthmore, and Reed as examples of three colleges with strong sagas. He demonstrates how the sagas at these schools profoundly influence them. At Reed

College, for example, the saga dates from the school's founding in 1910 by William T. Foster. The first president established a college known for "hard-won excellence and nonconformity" (Clark, 1972, p. 180). Antioch's saga arose from the influence of reformer Arthur E. Morgan. He completely restructured Antioch and launched a saga based on combining work, study, and community participation.

Heroes. Organizational heroes or Saints (Deal and Kennedy, 1982; Dill, 1982) are a second window on organizational culture. Heroes are important to an organization and often represent ideals and values in human form. They may play a central role in an institution's saga because heroes are people who have made crucial decisions or who exemplify the proper way to act. They are role models, set standards, or preserve what makes the organization special. People in an organization tell stories about heroes and the examples they set. The stories about heroes are another way to see organizational culture. They are passed down to newcomers in an organization as examples of successful (or perhaps unsuccessful) behavior in the past.

Often a college's founder is an organizational hero. The example of Reed College cited above illustrates such a hero. Another small college that has always combined liberal arts with career-oriented programs for women provides a second example. Its founder stated that he wanted to provide women with an education that would make them self-sufficient. The college does this, and it did so long before the current trend towards career education began. The school's founder set an example personnel at the college endeavor to follow. A hero at a business college provides a final illustration. He was a long-time faculty member and administrator who fought for accreditation from an

important agency. His long battle demonstrated the value college personnel place on excellence. Winning the accreditation validated their belief.

Symbols. Symbols are a third window on organizational culture. A symbol is something that represents something else. Thus a symbol can make tangible an implicit value or belief. Personnel can point to a symbol as a concrete example much the same way that a hero personifies cultural values. Symbols can also serve an important external function. While heroes and stories may only be known to those within an organization, the public may recognize organizational symbols.

The business college mentioned above provides an excellent example of how a symbol gives insight into culture. The college has fairly extensive computer resources. It uses them to introduce students to the techniques and knowledge they will need in tomorrow's business environment. The desire to do this stems in part from the value the college places on leadership and excellence in business education. The computer facilities are a symbol or concrete evidence of this value.

Metaphor is another helpful type of symbol. The language people use when they talk about an organization reveals its culture. As with other symbols, metaphors make explicit normally implicit cultural values and beliefs (Beaudoin, 1981). Because metaphors help express that which usually is difficult to verbalize, they are an excellent key for unlocking culture. Masland (1982) studied a college that described its computer facilities as "supermarket computing." This is a vivid image that invokes a sense of practicality and value in the institution's approach to computing.

Rituals. Rituals are another means of identifying cultural values, beliefs, and ideologies. Rituals are a useful tool for uncovering culture because they translate culture into action. They provide tangible evidence of culture. An outstanding teaching award ceremony, for example, can demonstrate to an academic community the strength of the institution's values. Is such a ceremony taken seriously and the recipient seen as receiving a great honor, or is it shrugged off as meaningless? If the institution values excellence in teaching the former is more likely than the latter. Rituals provide continuity with the past. They demonstrate that old values and beliefs are still playing a role in campus life. Rituals also provide meaning. In an organization with ambiguous goals and uncertain outcomes, the annual convocation ceremony may provide a sense of meaning and direction for personnel. It reinforces the institution's culture. Finally, small daily rituals of interaction between faculty and administrators, for example, illustrate the relative importance of each group and the ideologies surrounding their roles.

Collecting Cultural Data

Saga, heroes, rituals, and symbols are all means of exploring an organization's culture. In a strong culture they work in unison and illustrate the culture. But the task of learning about each of them remains. The three common techniques described below are useful ways of learning about the four cultural windows and thus culture itself.

Interviews, observation, and document analysis are the three basic techniques. Of the three, interviews are the most important. Members of various campus constituencies such as faculty, students, administrators, and staff should be included in the interview sample.

Snowball sampling (Murphy, 1980), in which one respondent suggests others who might also have valuable information, is a useful sampling method. With such a sampling plan the investigator can locate those individuals who have the greatest knowledge of the college.

Interviews are the most effective means of gathering data on beliefs, attitudes, and values (Gorden, 1975). But culture is implicit, so interview questions cannot ask about culture directly. Asking respondents what makes their college distinct or unique, or what makes it stand apart from similar schools a prospective applicant might consider is a useful means of obtaining information on culture. Similar questions focus on the school's educational philosophy and what is unique about its academic mission.

Interviewees often respond positively to questions about organizational heroes, although referring to them as heroes may be counterproductive. Ask respondents who the organization remembers and why they are remembered. Questions about organizational heroes are closely connected to questions about institutional history. Because cultural values and beliefs become institutionalized slowly over a period of time, their influence on past events is often apparent. Interviews are an excellent means of gathering such data.

During the interview respondents draw upon their understanding of the institution's saga. They disclose what the college means to them. They refer to the symbols, rituals, and heroes that represent this meaning in a more tangible form. Listening carefully to responses in an interview is an excellent means of uncovering organizational culture.

Observation is a second useful technique that is concurrent with the interviews. It is not classical observation of decision makers at

work, committee meetings, or faculty members' teaching. Rather, it is observing from many sources what is important in daily life on the campus. Through observation one can learn which issues receive careful attention and close scrutiny. Such issues are often central to the organization's culture.

Observation is a means of learning more about cultural symbols, rituals, and heroes. As an outsider, an observer often sees symbols to which community members have become habituated. Thus the observer may recognize the implicit meaning and importance of symbols that an insider takes at face value. As with symbols, an outsider may see rituals that insiders do not notice. These are the small, daily rituals that illustrate the relative value placed on different people or positions in the organization. And of course the memories of heroes are often immortalized in paintings, statues, or buildings.

The third technique is analysis of written documents. These can include, but are not limited to, official college publications, correspondence, minutes of meetings, campus newspapers, and college histories. Document analysis is a useful means of filling in the gaps interviews and observation leave. It is also a valuable addition because documents are not subject to problems of selective recall and reinterpretation in light of the contemporary situation (Murphy, 1980). Finally document analysis is an efficient method of gathering background information on the college.

Document analysis is well suited for collecting data on institutional history. Historical accounts provide past examples of cultural influences while also illuminating the development of values, beliefs, and ideologies. Presidential annual reports often reference

particularly important or traumatic events and decisions. Similarly, reports of blue ribbon committees may contain information about organizational culture. Campus newspapers may also refer to key events and decisions. Those that create controversy often come closest to important cultural values and beliefs. Finally, historical documents often highlight important and continuing rituals such as convocations or award ceremonies.

Document analysis is also a means of learning more about the college's curriculum and its relationship to the campus culture. Worth noting are the unique features of a curriculum and why they exist. Often the curriculum reflects characteristics of organizational culture.

Several types of documents lend themselves to cultural analysis. Among these are institutional mission statements, planning documents, and self-studies for accreditation. While such documents may seem trite (Chait, 1979), they are part of an organization's culture. Particularly in an organization with a strong culture, a mission statement often reflects the institution's culture.

Use of interviews, observation, and document analysis permits triangulation (Denzin, 1970). Each technique should confirm data obtained using the other two. Differences among the data must be investigated and the reasons for inconsistencies uncovered. In organizations with a strong culture, data from each source should confirm the other two because written statements, actions, and oral descriptions all form a coherent whole. Discrepancies among the data sources may indicate a weak or fractured culture.

Analysis of Cultural Data

Qualitative data such as that on organizational culture is usually complex and voluminous. Analysis begins and is concurrent with data collection. While gathering information the researcher will begin to see themes and trends in what people say about the organization and what he or she observes. These preliminary findings can then be tested and further explored as the data collection process continues.

The basic analytic technique is thematic analysis (Schatzman and Strauss, 1978). This means that the analyst must find the recurrent cultural themes in the data. The analyst must structure and code the data in order to distill important aspects of the organizational culture he or she observed. Once the researcher uncovers the themes, he or she must discover how they fit together. The analyst must distill the principal ideas that recur throughout. This develops into the central "story line" on the institution's culture. On a campus with a strong culture the analytic process is relatively straightforward because the data are consistent. If the culture is weak, the themes will not be as strong and the data may show discrepancies.

Consistency in cultural images takes several forms. Each respondent will refer to the same organizational heroes. Trends or problems which reappear over the history of the organization point to important cultural elements. Rituals and symbols will support the culture. The clarity of values and the ways in which people act on them will be apparent. Another key to analysis is to look for the repeated use of symbols and rituals. Those repeated in many different contexts point to fundamental cultural features (Ortner, 1973). Important parts

of the organization's culture are also associated with several different symbols or rituals.

Why Study Organizational Culture?

Organizational culture is what Leifer (1979) calls an unobtrusive organizational control. It is a means of controlling the behavior of individuals within an organization. Unobtrusive controls operate in conjunction with two other levels of control mechanisms. Explicit controls (such as formal regulations and direct comments) and implicit controls (such as specialization and hierarchy), also influence organizational life. But when explicit and implicit controls are weak, the unobstrusive forces, such as organizational culture, become more important. A college or university campus is the classic example of an organization with weak explicit and implicit control mechanisms (Cohen and March, 1974; March and Olsen, 1976). Thus it is all the more appropriate to study organizational culture in higher education.

Organizational culture provides several useful insights into colleges and universities. On a theoretical level cultural analysis is a useful tool for researchers. Over the past decade the bureaucratic model of academic governance has expanded to include political concepts and those of organized anarchies (Baldridge, 1971; Cohen and March, 1972). Understanding the culture of a particular institution further explains campus management because culture profoundly influences managerial style and decision practices. Analysis of culture may expose conflicting cultural elements which lead to ineffective behavior and plans. It can also help explain variations in curriculum and resistance to curricular change.

Organizational culture is also useful on the practical level. Exploration of organizational culture can help explain how an organization arrived at its current state. Culture explicates past influences on decisions and actions. It may provide an underlying rational for institutional development. This understanding provides a better foundation for future decisions and actions (Smith and Steadman, 1981).

Finally, as colleges and univerisities confront the challenge of the eighties, a better comprehension of organizational culture is vital at a broader level. As institutions and systems of higher education expand, academic culture fragments (Clark, 1980; Dill, 1982). Larger institutions, increased autonomy of institutional units, and specialization within disciplines all contribute to what Clark calls the move from an "integrated academic culture" to "the many cultures of the conglomeration" (1980, p. 25). If, as this paper contends, culture is a critical element of institutional life and management, we all must pay careful attention to culture. In fact Dill (1982) argues that administrators must "manage" academic cultures during these times of delcine because an institution derives strength from its culture. Institutional culture relieves some of the pressures and strains that decline puts on the social fabric of an organization. It does this because culture is a force that provides stability and a sense of continuity to an ongoing social system such as a college or university. Managing a force such as culture is a difficult task at best. The first step is acknowledging culture's existence and trying to understand the cultures of individual campuses. The techniques outlined above are useful in this respect.

Thus exploring organizational culture is another means of learning more about colleges and universities. Traditional approaches to studying governance and decision making, for example, provide useful insights into why and how higher education works the way it does. But the perspective of cultural influences supplements the traditional approaches. It further explains the variations found among colleges and universities. Although organizational culture is difficult to identify and study, it is worth the effort. Cultural influences should become part of the common parlance of researchers in higher education.

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